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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concepts of representation and response as illustrated, first, by "seeing-in" (Wollheim, 1980, 1987) or by the "reading" of a painting in which the viewer regards a particular painting from different perspectives and angles. In both instances, the reading involves a dual engagement with the substance and the medium. This observation technique may appear to a literature teacher as similar to the process that young readers undergo during the initial stages of learning to read. Findings are discussed from a study conducted with two teenagers viewing a painting, their discussion and notes, within actual transcripts of the discussion included. Results reveal that the student perceives the painting, conceives a mental vision of it, and constructs its meaning similar to what would be done when reading a poem. Three steps of synthesis by the viewer toward the painting or poem are discussed: illumination of the viewer's perception, filling in of noted gaps, and constructing the meaning of the object being viewed. (Contains 23 references.) (NAV)

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Looking at Paintings : Representation and Response

Michael Benton

(This paper is a draft chapter for a forthcoming book entitled *Secondary Worlds: Literature Teaching and the Visual Arts*, to be published by the Open University Press in 1992).

Representation and response

Writing about the art of making images, Gombrich (1960, p. 98) quotes a celebrated remark by Matisse: "When a lady visiting his studio said, 'But surely, the arm of this woman is much too long', the artist replied politely, 'Madam, you are mistaken. This is not a woman, this is a picture'." This exchange focusses upon my purposes in this paper which concern two fundamental concepts we need to keep in mind when working with pictures - representation and response. Perhaps the most important contribution to visual theory since E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* - the significance of which has been likened by one recent commentator as comparable to that of Reynolds' *Discourses* two centuries earlier (Bryson 1991, p. 62) - is Richard Wollheim's *Art and its Objects* (1980, 2nd edn.) and his *Painting as an Art* (1987). His second chapter in the latter book, "What The Spectator Sees", concentrates on issues of visual experience which Gombrich had earlier addressed in the corresponding chapter, "The Beholder's Share", of his classic study. Both write in the mainstream perceptualist tradition as distinct, for example, from semiological approaches (Bryson 1991) to visual representation, or to approaches which resist the idea that representation is grounded in perception or in our phenomenological experience of the world, in favour of defining it according to the historical conditions of its origin and reception (Nochlin 1991).

The two main theoretical questions posed by mainstream theory that have been paramount since *Art and Illusion*, according to Michael Podro (1991, p. 165) are, first, "How is it that we can convincingly show the look of the three-dimensional moving world on what we are still aware of as a still two-dimensional surface?"; and, secondly, "How does the presence of the surface and the facture of the paint enter our awareness of the subject

depicted upon it?". Wollheim's answer (to which Podro's own seems remarkably similar) lies in his concept of "seeing-in".

Seeing-in is an experience any visitor to an art gallery will have had who has spent time gazing at a particular painting, occasionally moving in close, or adjusting the angle of viewing. It is to have a dual-aspect yet unitary experience in response to a painting. It is unitary in that the viewer's absorption in the image is inclusive of two features : the viewer sees both the depicted objects or figures, yet also sees the marked surface as evidenced in say, the brush strokes, the density of the texture, the cracks in the paint, the glare, and so on. Wollheim argues that the connection between representation and seeing-in is essential. Writing about how painters achieve naturalistic effects, he says : "Specifically, we need to invoke the phenomenology of seeing-in : two-foldness" (Wollheim 1987, p.72). He calls the two complementary aspects of seeing-in, the recognitional aspect where the spectator discerns something in the marked surface, and the configurational aspect which indicates the spectator's awareness of the marked surface *per se*. Both aspects of this two-foldness operate in the spectator together, and it is this simultaneous awareness of "a depicted subject" and "the marked surface" which ensures that the framed scene registers both in depth and as flat.

Literature teachers may register both a recognition and a cause for unease at this point. We feel on familiar territory when seeing-in appears to be a similar process to the one young readers undergo during the initial stages of learning to read. Constructing a meaning and decoding print are analogous in their two-fold nature to the recognitional and configurational aspects of Wollheim's concept. The likeness is unsurprising since contemporary reading theory is based on a largely psychological account of how we make textual meaning, and Wollheim's visual theory is similarly one that is "committed to a psychological account of pictorial meaning" (Wollheim 1987, p. 306). Reading - whether a painted image or a written text - seemingly involves a dual engagement with the substance and the medium. The unease arises when we then ask whether this dual engagement of Wollheim's "two-foldness" is, in fact, simultaneous. For what actually happens when we look at a painting and become aware of

both the depicted subject matter and the marked surface, is that the mind shuttles rapidly back and forth between the two. As Gilbert Ryle (1949) has pointed out, "we cannot attend twice at once"; but what the mind can do is to switch perspective with remarkable speed and facility. Is not Wollheim's "two-foldness" more accurately described as bi-focalism?

There is a lively debate among visual theorists on this question of simultaneity (Gombrich 1960, pp. 4-5; Wollheim 1987, pp. 104-105 and p. 360; Podro 1991, p. 184) which, given the current emphasis in English teaching upon the reader's role in engaging with literature (Cox 1989), assumes a greater importance than that of an academic footnote. For what is again at issue is the nature of the reader's response, only this time the focus of attention is a painting. What I wish to argue is that it is plausible to describe the reader's/ viewer's response to the represented image in terms of the "bisociated mind" (Koestler 1975, p. 303) of the spectator, operating on the continuum of detachment and involvement as outlined in my discussion of the secondary world (Benton 1983; Benton and Fox 1985). In effect, this is a middle position between that of Gombrich and Wollheim. The former denies the possibility of simultaneity, arguing on the basis of the well known figure-ground reversals (duck/ rabbit; vase/ faces; young woman with a plumed hat/ old woman with a shawl), that the viewer's attention alternates and that it is literally inconceivable to focus on both elements together. Where paintings are concerned this leads him to assume, in Michael Podro's words, that "there's a psychological incompatibility between seeing the actual surface and seeing the scene depicted on it" (Podro 1991, p. 184). Wollheim, on the other hand, insists upon the unitary nature of "two-foldness" as fundamental to visual competence; surface and scene are essentially part of the same phenomenon of aesthetic viewing. Yet, while it is easy to counter Gombrich's reliance upon figure-ground reversals because they comprise two homogeneous images, rather than the heterogeneity of surface and scene, it is unconvincing in the light of common experience to wrap up both aspects in a single enclosing concept which denies the mobility of imaginative participation and the variability of attention that the viewer customarily exhibits before a work of art.

Wollheim's two-foldness is that of the "ideal viewer", rather similar to the "ideal reader" who has appeared in literary theory from time to time (Culler 1975). By contrast, what real readers/ viewers do is to adopt a rather more pragmatic, maybe cavalier, role. Diane Collinson (1985, pp. 271-274) puts herself engagingly into the shoes of "the ordinary spectator" strolling through an art gallery and invents a typical thought-track as a way of disentangling the elements that go to make up the aesthetic experience of viewing paintings. In a passage that recalls Iser's "indeterminacy gaps" (1978, pp. 170-179), Rosenblatt's concept of "evocation" (1978; 1985, p. 39), and my methodological notion of "introspective recall" (Benton 1988, p. 26), Collinson says:

> Perhaps aesthetic experience is even better typified by the gaps between "the ordinary spectator's" phrases; by the wordless moments when the spectator is poised in the act simply of apprehending the painting rather than when remarking on it. Indeed, if we think back to the remark "Ah, that sunlit field", it is the "Ah" more than "that sunlit field" that reveals the sensuous immediacy of the aesthetic moment. For it is not an experience in which we formulate an intellectual judgement to the effect that a vision of a sunlit field has been wondrously depicted. Rather, we experience the vision for ourselves; we are admitted to the painter's point of view. It is a distinguishing mark of aesthetic experience that it is one of participating in, or inhabiting, the world of the picture. Most of the comments or remarks indicative of the experience are retrospective in that they are about it rather than a part of it.

This account seems to be consistent with the responses that the students display in the following pages. It invites us to consider aesthetic experience as "participating in .... the world of the picture" and, in so doing, adopts a stance for the viewer which is comparable to that of the reader who chooses to enter the secondary world of fiction. We can become "lost" in a painting as we can in a poem or story in the sense that we become absorbed for a time in the "world" that is to be explored; but, as with fiction, absorption is a variable quality not a stable state and, sooner or later, the mind becomes more alert to the linguistic character of a text or

the marked surface of a painting and, consequently, less to the invented world that is portrayed through these verbal and visual media. Moments later, the reader/ viewer may become re-absorbed, and so continue to shuttle to and fro along what

"Coming from Evening Church" by Samuel Palmer
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was termed earlier "the plane of psychic distance", experiencing varying degrees of involvement in and detachment from the world depicted in the work of art and varying degrees of critical or analytical insight into the ways in which the work is constituted.

Talking about a Painting : "Coming From Evening Church" by Samuel Palmer

(Note: I am grateful to Maggie Miller of Hounsdown School, Nr. Southampton, for the field work and transcripts upon which this section is based.)

Let us now eavesdrop upon these characteristics of representation and response in practice. Two sixteen year old GCSE students, Sarah and Susie, are looking at a colour slide of Samuel Palmer's painting, "Coming From Evening Church" (1830). They had been told nothing about Palmer nor seen any of his paintings before. The picture dates from his Shoreham years and is described by Raymond Lister (1985, plate 20) as "... one of Palmer's most numinous works, a vesper hymn in paint".

The students spent a few minutes looking and silently formulating their own first impressions in note form. Then they decided to discuss their responses, adding to their notes where appropriate. The following sequence of extracts from this collaborative activity shows them moving in and out of the world of the painting, interpreting both details and the overall theme and, in these first exchanges, orientating themselves in relation to what we can call "the implied viewer".

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Extract 1

Su. (writing) We decided the sun was setting in the viewer's position

Sa. Behind the painter

Su. In the audience's .... yeah, behind the painter .... even though he's dead ....

Sa. to project the red colour

Su. Whereas the moon was rising

Sa. I said the overall painting is reddish and the moon is full and low in the sky

Su. I said it was earthy colours like really sort of rich red, yellow, green and brown. It's a real sort of harmony of earthy colours, isn't it?

Sa. Yeah, it's very natural

Su. But you're sort of like misled by the naturalness of it, the colouring because it looks unnatural when you look at the detail of, like, the hills .... they look very unnatural don't they? Sort of humpety bumpety, humpety bumpety

Sa. Yeah

Su. Like bubbles and the houses .... see that house there - it looks sort of fat doesn't it? Fat and round and homely and you'd never, sort of, see houses like that around would you? It's quite an old painting isn't it? .... looking at their dress .... isn't it?

The first three utterances suggest the position of the implied viewer in complementary ways : Susie is conscious of her spectator role and talks in terms of the "viewer" and the "audience" and seems to have some difficulty in detaching herself from this immediacy to concede Sarah's description that the sunlight must be assumed to come from "behind the painter" - "even", as Susie says, "though he's dead"! As they quickly realise, the light is a mixture of the dying sun and the rising moon, and this creates both an unearthly atmosphere and an ambiguous feeling when you inspect the details; as the girls put it, they are both "natural" and

"unnatural". It is this strange luminosity together with the arching trees that lead them a few moments later to identify the overall theme of the painting.

Extract 2

Su. It's got to be a sort of mega religious intentions, hasn't it? ... the way it's sort of a harmony of earthy colours and the way it's framed by those two trees up in the corner .... They have them in the church so that, like, as you're walking into the church and saying how holy and earthy people we are ... sort of thing .... What are you going to say now?

Sa. I was going to say the impression projected is religious and homely.

The light, the "harmony of earthy colours", the tall Blakean trees that act as a frame within a frame all point to the "religious and homely" atmosphere that Sarah jots down in her notes. There is an interesting shift of perspective, too, in the middle of Susie's remarks : when she first mentions the two framing trees she is clearly referring to the composition of the painting; her later comments indicate that in her mind's eye she has transferred the schematic outline of the framing arch into the conventional doorway arch of the traditional church. The metaphoric power of Palmer's painting is clearly evident here in her response, encouraged, no doubt, by the effect of the intricate leaf patterns where the trees meet to form the rough, cusped arch.

During the next few minutes they are note-making and discussing details of the "ivy creeping everywhere" and the appearance of the hills, until they come to focus on the portrayal of the people. They agree about the sense of community but disagree about the technique of painting the faces of the individual figures.

Extract 3

Su. (Writing) The painting is ... portraying people as harmonious ... by walking in procession together and symbolising community.

Sa. Yeah

Su. And it's really effective in that way isn't it? And then, because they symbolise community life, it's framed by the woodlands, by the elements, by the sky, the wood, by nature ... nature.... I think the background for these people represents nature because it's so sort of naturally coloured and naturally textured and convincing.

Sa. Yeah

Su. So idyllic ... idyllic ...?

Sa. Idealistic

Su. Idealistic ... and they're sort of framed at the end by these lovely trees. There's not much detail in their faces is there?

Sa. No, that's because the paint is so thick; (you) can't see the details in thick paint.

Su. I know, but like, perhaps it's significant that they don't have any sort of fine features in their faces because everyone's got ... you know, when you're painting people you always want to put the eyes and the nose and the mouth to sort of like pick out the individuals, but because they don't want to pick out individuals they want to represent ... anybody rather than somebody. (Pause) I'm going to put something down about the faces because I think that's significant.

Sa. What? About ... they've haven't really got any ....

Su. Hf'mm

Sa. I don't think it is ... because I just think it's the technique of the painter ....

Su. Look, you know when you're painting a picture ... you start thinking of what everything you do represents and what you're trying to tell your audience ... you're trying to prove to your audience ....

Sa. Yeah, I know but the paint he's chosen means that the ... his faces aren't very big, I mean he's got eyes and mouth but he's not trying to make them look like anyone.

Su. No, he's just got the sort of like, fundamental things about people.

Sa. Yeah, but he's not trying to make them look like anybody so it doesn't matter, he doesn't want them to look like people because they're not specific people - it's just a community of faces.

In commenting upon the serpentine procession of figures that takes the eye into the picture and leads it to the central icon of the church, the students do not focus upon this formal element *per se* but upon its symbolic significance. Susie's first two utterances extend her line of thinking in the previous extract and suggest that she has sensed the way the composition situates the actual church within "the church of nature". There is a two stage shift in the spectator's viewpoint : as we look at the leading couple in the procession pausing, as it were, under the arched doorway of the church of nature, the eye is then led along the processional aisle of the path they tread and up to the doorway of the actual church, situated in the elevated position of a natural altar, behind which the illuminated hills, the sky and the rising moon provide a dramatic backdrop like a stained glass window. The symbolism and composition are perfectly harmonised : each of the girls' adjectives, "idyllic" and "idealistic", seems appropriate.

The discussion then turns to the absence of detail in the way the faces of the people have been painted. Representation and response are intimately related in these interchanges. Susie's concern is with the significance and intention of this aspect of representation; Sarah's approach is more painterly and alert to the constraints of technique and materials that the artist is using. Together they show an awareness of both the depicted scene and the marked surface as parts of a unified response to the painting, as their final remarks make clear. This is Wollheim's "seeing-in" in action; "two-foldness" is evident in Sarah's comments about "the paint he's chosen" and "a community of faces" in her final two utterances.

Near the end of their discussion the students concentrate upon the buildings, particularly the church.

Extract 4

Su. Hey .... that church being in the centre of the painting is very significant, isn't it? ... which ... and like, there's a white light ....

Sa. Yeah, but it's very hidden by that house ....

Su. Yeah, I mean the spire ... it's very white and it's very late in the evening isn't it?

Sa. That's because it's the highest isn't it?

Su. Yes, but it's very significant looking because if you look at it, it's very dead in the centre isn't it?

Sa. The lines of the construction are very .... Looking at the slide close up.

Su. What's this building here?

Sa. That's the rest of the church.

Su. No, it isn't.

Sa. Yes, it is.

Su. Can you see this? There's a roof .... I'll show you ... it's like this ....

Sa. Is that a tree?

Su. Another church? a sort of dome on the top ... like the ....

Sa. Could just be a tree.

Su. That? A tree?

Sa. Yeah, yeah ... look that's a tree.

Su. No it isn't, that's a building isn't it? Or another tree ... yeah. That's not a tree at all.

Sa. It's not green, it's a brown tree ... it's a round tree.

Again, the personal style of each student is apparent as, characteristically, Susie begins to interpret the significance of the central position of the spire, while Sarah comments upon the technical construction of the image. They become understandably puzzled about just which of the depicted buildings are parts of the church. The group of steeply-gabled roofs, one with a sort of domed top as Susie remarks, contrast markedly with the elongated spire which breaks the soft lines of the similarly domed hills behind.

Palmer's overriding concern here with the composition of shapes rather than precise detail has the effect of drawing the viewers into a close scrutiny of this aspect of the image: is it a village building, a tree, the rest of the church or another church altogether? The issue remains inconclusive just as the painting is indefinite; yet, there is no sense of frustration in the girls' remarks, rather a tacit understanding of the conventions of this sort of painting where the achievement of compositional harmony to express Palmer's pastoral vision is more important than fine detail.

As a means of making a final statement after this collaborative looking, talking and note-making, the students were invited to sketch an outline of the picture in the centre of the page and to arrange their comments on the light, the natural detail, colours, people, and shapes around their sketch (Benton M and P 1990, p. 53). This task enabled them to summarise their main ideas, an activity which learners do not often do naturally for themselves. It was not only useful but enjoyable and provided a satisfying closure to their experience of Samuel Palmer's painting.

Three Phases of Looking

In exploring some theoretical approaches to representation and response and observing how they work out in practice, we have essentially been asking three questions:

- What happens to your eye?
- What happens behind your eye?
- What happens beyond your eye?

The first concerns the viewer's perception of a painting, the means by which this object of contemplation is taken in. The second concerns the viewer's conception of a painting, the means by which it becomes lodged within the mind when the individual has taken possession of it. The third concerns the viewer's construction of meaning, the way in which an interpretation is formulated. Each takes us progressively further into the experience of looking at a painting. The process is not unlike that of coming to terms with a poem. Indeed, not only are there many historical links

between these "sister arts" (Hagstrum 1958) but there are also many correspondences in contemporary literary and visual theory. A few of these connections are offered as a tentative conclusion.

Central to the idea of representation is the ubiquitous "conceptual image". Gombrich (1960, p. 76) points out that all art originates in the human mind; it is conceptual, not something "out there" in the visible world. This phenomenon is most easily seen in children's drawings, which are typically remote from representation, "because children draw what they know and not what they see". He develops the notion of the conceptual image in terms that complement those of Iser and Rosenblatt:

> ... the painter relies on our readiness to take hints, to read contexts, and to call up our conceptual image under his guidance. The blob in the painting by Manet which stands for a horse ... (is) so cleverly construed that it evokes the image in us - provided, of course, we collaborate. (Gombrich 1960, p. 10)

There are three particular features of this collaboration between the reader / viewer and the poem / painting that are worth stressing, each of which relates, respectively, to one of the three key questions discussed above. The first, illuminating the viewer's perception, is what Gombrich calls "guided projection" and it finds its complement in Louise Rosenblatt's insistence that "aesthetic reading" must honour the uniqueness of both the reader and the text. Speaking of impressionist painting, Gombrich says that

> ... the beholder must mobilise his memory of the visible world and project it into the mosaic of strokes and dabs on the canvas before him. It is here, therefore, that the principle of guided projection reaches its climax. The image, it might be said, has no firm anchorage left on the canvas ... it is only conjured up in our minds. The willing beholder responds to the artist's suggestion because he enjoys the transformation that occurs in front of his eyes .... The artist gives the beholder increasingly "more to do", he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of "making" .... (p.169)

Rosenblatt (1970, p. 113), similarly, says that "every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew". Sarah and Susie, too, show us, particularly in extracts 1 and 2, where they discuss the houses and the church, that re-creative reading involves making a synthesis of those elements within the reader's/ viewer's own nature and those aspects of experience to which the text/ painting actually refers.

Secondly, as in painting so in literature, the work of art contains "indeterminancy gaps" (Iser) or "incomplete images" (Gombrich) which, for readers/ viewers, become spaces which we are required to fill. We feel the presence even of features we do not see. The incompleteness of Palmer's depiction of one of the shapes leads to some lively exchanges between the two students about what they are looking at, as we have seen in extract 4. What we observe here is the two viewers' struggle with the second phase of looking outlined above - their efforts towards a conception of this detail. The pressure to complete their conception of that area of the painting is dictated by the degree of indeterminacy in the image. There are similar structured gaps in literary texts that, as Iser shows, draw the readers in and call upon them, in Barthes' sense, to become "writers" - composers of their own virtual texts in response to the actual one.

Thirdly, crucial to the process of synthesising all the diverse details and perspectives we experience when coming to terms with a text or painting, is the operation of what Iser (1978, p. 119) calls the "wandering viewpoint", which is seen not only as a means of describing the way in which the reader is present in the text, but also as fundamental to the third phase of reading paintings and poems - the construction of meaning. Moreover, Gombrich's influence in theorising this aspect of aesthetic experience is acknowledged by Iser and invites us to extend its application into how we interpret visual as well as verbal art. Iser writes:

> Here we have one of the basic elements of the reading process: the wandering viewpoint divides the text up with interacting structures, and these give rise to a grouping activity that is fundamental to the grasping of a text.

> The nature of this process is shown clearly by a remark of Gombrich's: "In the reading of images, as in the hearing of speech, ... it is the guess of the beholder that tests the medley of forms and colours for coherent meaning, crystallising it into shape when a consistent interpretation has been found". (p. 119)

The "grouping activity" which Iser mentions is supported by references to Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (1971), thus further aligning the ways in which readers and viewers make meaning. We have seen something of this procedure in the "wandering viewpoint" of the two students as, for example, they move from colours, to the shape of the hills, to the house, to the dress of the people, all within a few utterances (extract 1).

When we try to tease out the components that go to make up a unified process in order to understand that process better, there is always the danger that the parts do not add up to whole. Particularly in this area of aesthetic response to represented images, the three phases of perception, conception and construction of meaning may not cover that elusive but nonetheless real sense of delight that expresses and confirms the viewers' feeling of aesthetic pleasure. Diane Collinson's remarks quoted earlier suggest the same idea; so do Susie's comments, at the end of the taped discussion, when the students are reviewing their responses to Samuel Palmer's painting:

> It seems to be in a valley because of these huge hills and these hills make me laugh, they're like bubbles ... so sort of unrealistic. And the way it's sort of framed ....

Her enjoyment of the whole experience of looking at the painting is evident. Visual pleasure clearly derives from the interplay of exploring a recognizable scene and appreciating the artifice with which that scene is represented.

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